

Public Education

Utah Citizens' Counsel Education Committee

Article 3. All Utahns have the right to a public education that ensures literacy, numeracy, critical thinking, character development, and the capability for responsible citizenship to help secure a promising future for Utah in a complex, interdependent, and competitive world.

Introduction

Last year's assessment focused on Utah's reduced commitment over the past 20 years to funding public education and consequent reduced student achievement measured against peer states. We urged the Legislature to reverse its deliberate cuts in income tax rates that have hurt public education and to increase appropriations, especially for at-risk students and preschool education.

The 2015 Legislature took modest steps to increase support for public education and target specific areas of need. It increased the value of the weighted pupil unit by 4% and passed a bill to help equalize state property tax revenues between richer and poorer school districts. It added a few one-time grants: for instance, for improved school counseling, K-3 reading interventions, and online preschool programs (Upstart). Nonetheless, earlier cuts in income and property taxes that did not keep up with enrollment growth continue to reduce public education dollars by hundreds of millions per year, with concomitant lower national achievement rankings.¹ We expect to return to education finance and achievement measures in future years.

This year we are focusing on our previous recommendation for expanded high-quality preschool education for children from low-income families, English language learners, and others at risk. Our focus emerges from recognition that much of the U.S. opportunity gap is attributable to what happens in children's lives before they reach school age. Commenting on research findings, distinguished Harvard social scientist Robert Putnam, in his 2015 book on the current status of U.S. children, stated: "The [opportunity/achievement] gap is already large by the time children enter kindergarten," adding later that it does not change appreciably as children progress through school.² In other words, the odds of success or failure have already been established.

Context: The Case for Preschool Education

Providing at-risk children with opportunities to become kindergarten ready is one of the most important ways that Utah can prepare its children to succeed in school and life. To UCC, giving at-risk preschoolers an equal opportunity to learn is an important human right. Poverty and other at-risk environments damage educational opportunity. Children from such backgrounds are less likely to have enriched language interactions with parents, books and computers in the home, vacations, or other developmental activities outside of school. With such disadvantages, and with parents generally having fewer years of schooling and holding multiple low income jobs, these children enter school far behind their middle-class peers.

The UCC Social Support Systems Committee, in this year's report, documents the critical role of the first three years of brain development and the loss of cognitive ability that can accrue from poverty and environmental deprivations. Building on the importance of these early years, we

share the convincing evidence for the effectiveness of high-quality early childhood education for three- and four-year-olds. Preschool programs should support families, not in any way act as substitutes for parents. This said, many parents find supplemental support valuable as they contend with major challenges that impede the development of their children.³

Research shows that, with high-quality early education, children (1) substantially increase their vocabulary and capacity to learn as measured by intelligence tests; (2) significantly improve their academic achievement, once they enter school; and (3) learn appropriate social skills and behavior patterns that contribute to greater success in school and life.⁴ Such early education also benefits society: (1) fewer children need special education; (2) personal and social problems are reduced; (3) fewer children drop out of school, are unemployed as adults, or poor; and (4) many more such children become contributing members of society.⁵ Large-scale studies provide benefit-cost estimates ranging from three to seven dollars saved for every dollar spent.⁶

Forty-one states now have various types of state-funded preschool programs. Twenty-nine use income as an eligibility criterion.⁷ Large cities too are funding their own preschool programs and developing nuanced risk factors. All the programs are optional, but 29 % of the country's four-year-olds are enrolled in state-funded preschools.⁸ Federally funded Head Start enrolls another 7%. Business organizations, foundations, and research agencies are promoting high-quality preschool education, especially for children who are poor or otherwise at risk.⁹

Full-day Kindergarten and Preschool Education in Utah

Kindergarten enrollment is optional in Utah, although the great majority of parents enroll their five-year-olds.¹⁰ The Utah State Office of Education (USOE) classifies one third of the 51,000 kindergartners as low income students--those eligible for free or reduced lunch.¹¹ Of the 51,000, only 18% were in full-day or extended-day kindergarten.¹² In contrast, nationally, 77% of 5-year-olds are in full-day kindergarten; our neighbor Colorado enrolls 74%.¹³ Research clearly shows that full-day kindergarten results in significant academic gains for the children enrolled.¹⁴

Utah is lagging even farther behind in state-funded preschool programs. Yet, some research indicates that a combination of pre-K and half-day kindergarten achieves better results than full-day kindergarten alone.¹⁵ In January 2015, *Education Week* rated Utah as last in the nation for public preschool services, noting that the gap between poor children and non-poor children in Utah preschools had actually grown between 2008 and 2013.¹⁶ The Utah Foundation recently reported that only 13% of the approximately 53,000 four-year-olds were in publicly funded preschools in 2012-2013--7% in Head Start and 6% in special education¹⁷ In short, less than 1% of the state's non-special-education preschoolers attended state-funded preschools, a distressingly low percent that is only marginally higher now.

The few public or public/private high-quality preschool programs¹⁸ in Utah are of recent vintage. Granite School District has the largest such preschool programming of any district in the state, dating from 2006-07. Last year, it served 883 three-year-olds and 1564 four-year-olds in programs receiving Title I and "Pay For Success" private investments. Of this number, 88-89% were eligible for free or reduced lunch. Nine hundred more children were on waiting lists.¹⁹ Most other high-quality preschools in the state date from the Legislature's House Bill 96 (2014), which has provided \$3 million in ongoing state funding for competitive three-year grants to school districts and private preschools to develop high-quality preschool programs.²⁰ To receive this

funding, preschools must implement the USOE's Early Childhood Standards for high-quality programs. Close to a dozen pilot programs have been funded, with more expected to follow.

The various state-funded preschool programs can (and some do) receive additional funding from foundations, nonprofits, federal grants, municipalities, and sliding-fee-scale payments. Different curricula and methods, along with varying levels of teacher preparation, parent involvement, and assessment procedures make the program outcomes difficult to compare currently. The need for uniform assessment procedures is significant.

The School Readiness Board created under HB 96 can enter into state-financed contracts with private investors who are willing to front the cost of serving a specific number of children at high-quality preschools in expectation of a return on their investment. The preschools must document their high-quality programs and achieve specified outcomes. Such results-based investments are known as "Pay-For-Success" transactions or social impact loans.

HB 96 contracts were modeled on initial funding from Salt Lake County and the United Way of Salt Lake (\$350,000 and \$1 million, respectively), which secured loans from Goldman Sachs and J.B. Pritzker that enabled six preschool providers to serve an additional 600 children in 2013-14.²¹ The providers are Granite and Park City School Districts, YMCA of Northern Utah, Guadalupe School, Lit'l Scholars, and Children's Express. HB 96 is providing state funds to enable the private loans to continue for four additional years, dependent on State appropriation. This means that 750 children gained access in 2014-15. The plan is to serve a total of 2,250 children in Years 3-5.²² The need is for far more high-quality preschools across the state, serving far more at-risk children, and for scaled-up funding from multiple public and private sources.

Commendations²³

- The **growing public and private awareness** of the importance and value of preschool, especially for children from low-income families or who are English language learners. Among programs deserving recognition are the following:
 - Granite School District's preschool program**, which has extensive teacher and parent training and longitudinal data showing significant reduction or elimination of the achievement gap in language arts and math up through seventh grade thus far;
 - United Way of Salt Lake's upfront investment** in Pay-For Success preschools and its **collective impact model** in Park City, Granite, and Davis school districts;
 - YMCA of Northern Utah's collaboration** on high-quality preschools in Ogden District and Taylorsville Elementary School;
 - Washington, Canyons, Salt Lake City, Logan City, Grand, and Davis School Districts' pilot preschool programs** under HB 96;
 - Head Start's comprehensive approach** to health and education services for three- and four-year olds from low-income families;
 - Waterford Institute's Upstart program** (computer-based program at home for four-year-olds for 15 minutes a day/5 days a week).
- The **parent partnering component** in many preschool programs
- The **Utah Legislature's financial support for preschool, through House Bill 96 (2014)**

- **The Utah State Office of Education’s development of high-quality Early Childhood Standards** for public preschools throughout the state²⁴
- **Salt Lake City’s Capital Education Plan**, a comprehensive approach to education from birth to adulthood, currently in advanced planning stages with foundation support
- **Voices for Utah Children’s independent, nonpartisan research** and advocacy for preschool education
- **The SLC Chamber of Commerce’s involvement of the business community** across the state in support of preschool education as part of its Prosperity 20/20 Initiative
- **Private investors who have helped launch preschool programs in Utah**
- **Salt Lake County’s financial contribution to preschool education**

Recommendations

- **The Utah Legislature should increase funding** in steady stages for HB 96 grant programs and continue to reimburse private investors in the “Pay- For-Success” program.
- **The Utah State Office of Education (USOE) and local education agencies (LEAs) should dedicate a percentage of their federal Title I funds** to expand high-quality preschool programs for at-risk children.²⁵ The return on investment will be well worth more reallocation of Title I funds.
- **City and county governments, with ballot approval, should consider allocating a percentage of their sales tax revenues to quality preschools in low income areas.**
- **The Legislature should fund full-day kindergarten for at-risk children.**
- **The University of Utah and USOE, with engaged LEAs, should convene a state-wide conference to develop uniform assessment measures.** Outcomes using varying curricula and methods can be compared and uniform, reliable kindergarten readiness assessments established. Leading experts should be invited to share research and best practices to stimulate expanded program development in Utah.
- **The USOE should develop a strategic statewide plan to scale up high-quality preschool programming** for children at risk across the state.
- **All preschool programs should help parents enhance their own parenting skills** because parents are the greatest influence on their preschool children.
- As preschool education scales up, **high-quality preparation programs, better salaries, and a career path for preschool teachers must be addressed.**

Notes

¹ See the 2014 Utah Citizens' Counsel Education Committee Report and Appendix 1 for details about 20-year slippage in achievement scores and the deleterious financial impact of shifting to a flat income tax rate and failing to keep up with student enrollment growth. Recently released 2015 national achievement results for 4th and 8th grade math and reading show flat scores in Utah except for improvements in 4th grade reading. When adjusted for poverty, race, native language, and proportion of special education students, Utah's overall ranking is 47th in the country. Even our White students are underperforming compared to those in other states. See David Leonhardt, "Raw Scores Give Misleading Idea of School Progress," *New York Times*, October 27, 2015; Benjamin Wood, "Utah Students Steady on Math and Reading as Nation's Scores Drop," *Salt Lake Tribune*, October 28, 2015, B8.

² Robert D. Putnam, *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), 162.

Another influential statement comes from Procter and Gamble CEO John Pepper: "Early childhood development is the compelling economic, social, and moral issue of our time. It helps provide all children with the opportunities they deserve to develop their natural abilities. It is also the most effective way to build the workforce... we need. Investing in young children's healthy development is a financial and social imperative for any country "A Matter of Equity: Preschool in America," April 2015, 12, *U.S. Department of Education*, accessed September 3, 2015, <http://www2.ed.gov/documents/early-learning/matter-equity-preschool-america.pdf>.

³ For instance, Providence, Rhode Island, is scaling up its promising \$5 million "Providence Talks" initiative, which brings audio recordings into the homes of low-income parents to help them understand and improve their verbal interactions with their children. Sarah Sparks, "Research on Quality of Conversation Holds Deeper Clues into Word Gap," *Education Week*, April 22, 2015, 1, 11.

⁴ Leonard N. Masse and W. Steven Barnett, "Comparative Cost-Benefit Analysis of the Abecedarian Program and Its Policy Implications," *Economics of Education Review*, 26 (2007): 113-25. A good summary of preschool research is found at "The Economics of Early Childhood Investments," December 2014, *White House Council of Economic Advisers*, accessed September 7, 2015, <https://whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/docs/the-economics-of-early-childhood-investments.pdf>.

⁵ Kevin M. Gorey, "Early Childhood Education: A meta-analytic affirmation of the short and long-term benefits of educational opportunities," *School Psychology Quarterly*, 16 (2001): 9-30. For a more recent summary of multiple studies and benefits, see "The Research on Pre-K," *Center for Public Education (2008)*, accessed September 3, 2015, www.centerforpubliceducation.org/Main-Menu/Pre-kindergarten/Pre-Kindergarten?css=print.

⁶ Hirokazu Yoshikawa, et al., "Investing in Our Future: The Evidence Base on Preschool Education," October 2013, *Society for Research in Child Development & the Foundation for Child Development*, accessed September 3, 2015, <http://fcd-us.org/sites/default/files/Evidence%20Base%20on%20Preschool%20Education%20FINAL.pdf>. Other studies place the return on investment even higher. See "The Economics of Early Childhood Investments," 30-32.

⁷ "The State of Preschool 2014," *National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER)*, accessed August 29, 2015, http://www.nieer.org/sites/nieer/files/yearbook2014_full2_0.pdf.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁹ For example, Goldman Sachs, J.B. Pritzker, Procter and Gamble, SLC Chamber of Commerce, Kellogg Foundation, Lumina Foundation, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYP), National Institute for Early Education Research.

¹⁰ The total number for 2014-2015, over 51,000, was very close to the total number of 1st graders in that same year. The number of kindergartners is currently increasing each year. Kristin Campbell (USOE Research Consultant), e-mail data to Dixie Huefner, August 7, 2015, and follow-up conversation.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Utah Foundation, "Lessons from Our Neighbor: Learning from Colorado's Educational Success," Report No. 731, July 2015, 14. The report contrasts Colorado and Utah preschool and kindergarten programs. The SLC Chamber of Commerce and the Utah State Office of Education are supporting state funding for optional full-day kindergarten in Utah.

¹⁴ See, e.g., "Starting out right: pre-k and kindergarten: at a glance," *Center for Public Education*, February 2012, accessed September 3, 2015, www.centerforpubliceducation.org/Main-Menu/Organizing-a-school/Starting-Out-Right-Pre-K-and-Kindergarten?css=print.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ “States Graded on Indicators for Early Years,” *Education Week*, January 8, 2015, 16-17.

¹⁷ “Lessons from Our Neighbor,” 11-12. The report states that Colorado’s Preschool Program now reaches 22, 359 preschoolers each year . Its preschool programs are credited with a steep drop in the number of Colorado children who need special education in elementary school, resulting in dramatic cost savings for the state.

¹⁸ Not any preschool can achieve the desired outcomes. High-quality preschools are those that meet state standards, specified in Utah law at UCA 53A-1b-105. In broad outline, the standards include: an evidence-based curriculum that is aligned with all of the developmental domains and academic content defined in the Utah Early Childhood Standards; professional development for staff; ongoing student assessment; pre- and post-assessment, class size limits; ongoing program evaluation and data collection; family engagement; and at least the minimum standard of training for staff (child development associate--CDA).

¹⁹ Brenda Van Gorder (Granite Preschool Services Director), Conversation with Dixie Huefner on April 30, 2015 and follow-up conversation (notes in Huefner’s possession).]

²⁰ “Lessons From Our Neighbor,” 13, points out that funding preschool is not a partisan, red-state v. blue state issue. For instance, Texas enrolls 52% of its 4-year-olds in state-funded preschool; Georgia enrolls 58%, Oklahoma 74%, and Florida 78%.

²¹ United Way (UW) and SL County funds are held in an account to repay the investors when preschools reach specified results. In October 2015, the UW announced the first results from end of kindergarten assessments for children who were in preschools receiving UW funds under the Pay-For-Success model. Of 110 preschoolers who were expected as four-year-olds to need special education in kindergarten, only one required special education. The children will continue to be tracked through sixth grade, with future repayments to Goldman Sachs and J.B. Pritzker from HB 96 funds. Benjamin Wood, “Investment Helps Kids, Pays Dividends, United Way Says,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, October 7, 2015, A1. Of interest also is the October 11, 2015 op-ed by Senator Orrin Hatch and Kem Gardner, member of UW’s Board of Directors’ Executive Committee. The authors note the Utah results and describe the Senator’s current efforts to have the federal government help finance Pay-For-Success initiatives across the states so that they can replicate Utah’s success. “Pay for Success is a Model Ready for Federal Funding,” *Salt Lake Tribune*, October 11, 2015, O1. The high level of success in keeping at-risk students out of special education, and the metrics used, have been challenged, however, by some early-education experts. See Nathaniel Popper, "Did Goldman Make the Grade?" *New York Times*, November 4, 2015, B1.

²² Bill Crim, UW CEO, e-mail message to Dixie Huefner , September 3, 2015; Chris Ellis, UW Partnership Director, Early Learning Outcomes, e-mail message to Huefner, October 8, 2015.

²³ The following agencies or institutions were interviewed as part of our analysis and commendations: United Way of Salt Lake (Bill Crim, Chris Ellis), Voices for Utah Children (Janis Dubno, Terry Haven), University of Utah (Ruth Watkins, Geri Mendoza), Granite School District Preschool Services (Brenda Van Gorder), Salt Lake City Capital Education Plan (Joanne Milner, Ann Cook), YMCA of Northern Utah (Stella Patiño), SLC Chamber of Commerce (Lane Beattie), Salt Lake County (Ben McAdams) , Waterford Institute Upstart program (Isaac Trojo), Utah State Office of Education (Brad Smith, Sydnee Dickson, Susan Ofroy), Salt Lake Community Action Partnership Head Start (ErinTrenbeath-Murray), and Guadalupe School (Elsa Borell, Moira Rampton, Mary Draper).

²⁴ The USOE anticipates the selection of a statewide kindergarten assessment for implementation in the 2016-17 school year. The intent is to have both a pretest and posttest to assess early literacy and numeracy skills and progress made across the school year. The state board has not established any specific criteria for the assessment yet; it is open to both already created district/charter assessments and commercially produced assessments. Jennifer Thronsdon, USOE K-12 Literacy Coordinator, email to Dixie Huefner, November 29, 2015.

²⁵ According to Brenda Van Gorder, Granite School District already allocates 8.5% of its Title 1 monies to preschool programs, and small numbers of other districts across the state have also utilized limited Title I dollars to fund some preschool programs.